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TAGS: AMGT PREL SNAR VE

SUBJECT: MFA PLEDGES TO SPEED UP ACCREDITATION PROCESS; NO RELIEF ON DIP VISA OR CAR REGISTRATIONS

REF: A. CARACAS 2626
 B. CARACAS 2656

Classified By: ACTING MANAGEMENT COUNSELOR O.P. GARZA,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. A/Management Counselor met September 1 with MFA Division Chief for Immunities and Privileges Alberto Armas to press reciprocity issues as a follow-up to Special Coordinator for Venezuela McCarthy's and Charge's August 28 meeting with MFA Vice Minister Hernandez (Ref A). Armas said the MFA had adjudicated virtually all of the backlog of Embassy accreditation requests and would try to adjudicate future requests in three to five days (Note: This was before the September 4 announcement that Hernandez would be replaced). Armas denied any knowledge of the visa request for the new DEA Chief and attributed the delay in issuance to the Venezuelan National Anti-Drug office. He offered no relief on the two-year delays in registering diplomatic automobiles. Armas also cryptically said the Caracas municipal mayor's decree to expropriate a golf course (Ref B), including the DCM's residence and the future Ambassador's residence, is "very complicated."
End Summary.

U.S. Accreditation Requests

¶2. (SBU) Noting that an embassy official waited over 50 business days before being accredited on August 31, Acting Management Counselor urged MFA Division Chief for Immunities and Privileges Alberto Rojas to address such delays systematically. A/Management Counselor reminded Armas that MFA Vice Minister Hernandez pledged to address this issue in her August 28 meeting with visiting Special Coordinator for Venezuela Deborah McCarthy and Charge. If there are any concerns about U.S. processing of accreditation requests, the Embassy stands ready to assist with reasonable requests, but needs timely feedback. The Embassy also stands ready to provide needed information electronically, if that would speed the process up.

¶3. (C) Noting that he had represented Venezuela at the UN in New York, at the OAS and the bilateral embassy in Washington, Armas insisted that he and the other career diplomats in protocol are doing all they can to expedite Embassy accreditation requests. Armas said his section has cleared up almost all remaining accreditation requests and pledged to process future accreditation requests in three to five days. "Test me," Armas boasted, "if the Embassy provides a request with all the necessary information on a Monday, the credential will be ready for pick-up no later than Friday."

¶4. (C) Armas cautioned that Vice Minister for North American Affairs Mary Pili Hernandez would still have to sign off on all accreditation requests (Note: The MFA subsequently informed the media September 4 that Hernandez is being

replaced by Venezuelan OAS Ambassador Jorge Valera.) Armas also cautioned that Venezuela would insist on "reciprocal" treatment, and urged the USG to avoid implementing an eight-week delay in processing Venezuelan requests for accreditation in the U.S. Armas said he would pass "up" the U.S. offer to move toward electronic processing.

Diplomatic Visas

¶ 15. (C) A/Management Counselor raised the visa request for the incoming Embassy DEA chief. Armas passed the buck, claiming that this visa request is not being adjudicated by the MFA. Armas said the National Anti-Drug Office has the lead on this issue and suggested the delay is linked to the BRV's decision not to sign the addendum to our counternarcotics agreement. A/Management Counselor stressed that there is no basis for such linkage.

Car Registration

¶ 16. (C) Noting that diplomatic personnel may not sell their personal vehicles until three years after registration, A/Management Counselor expressed concern that it takes up to two years to register a diplomatic vehicle in Venezuela. Armas said he has raised this issue many times with the Transportation Ministry, and blamed the long delays on the 2004 fire at the Car Registration Office resulting in a "total collapse" in processing. Armas said his idea for a special diplomatic vehicle processing window had been rejected by the Transportation Ministry, but asserted that the car registration office is starting to tackle the backlog

so that the two-year delays can be reduced.

Threat of Expropriation

¶ 17. (C) At the end of the meeting, A/Management Counselor casually asked Armas about the Caracas municipal government's decree to expropriate land around two Caracas golf courses, including 22 embassies and diplomatic residences, the DCM's residence, and the Ambassador's future residence (Ref B). Armas said he was well aware of the issue, but declined to say anything more that that issues surrounding the expropriation decree are "very complicated."

Comment

¶ 18. (C) Embassy has experienced periodic accreditation delays for some time. At least one MFA official has admitted to us that the delays are deliberate, and previous MFA efforts to eliminate backlogs were fitful and sporadic. Embassy will continue to monitor the functioning of the MFA's visa and accreditation process, especially in the wake of the designation of a new Vice Minister for North American Affairs. Finally, Embassy requests Department investigate the question of registration of vehicles owned by Venezuelan diplomats in the United States, with a view to affording reciprocal treatment.

WHITAKER